

The Church's Glory

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Date: 22 September 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I add my welcome to Ben's welcome, and my son is at the retreat as well this morning, and he slept in a tent last night, so we'll see how he made out. He may be floating on his air mattress, I'm not sure, but it will be an adventure anyway. So you're warm and dry here on this dark, rainy morning, and we're talking about light. We're talking about the most incredible light that the universe has ever known as we talk about the transfiguration. If you haven't been with us, we're in the middle of a sermon series on Matthew, and we're in a part of Matthew where Jesus has taught about the cross-shaped life. That's what we talked about last week, that what it means that Jesus is the Messiah is not just that he is this glorious king, but he is the glorious king that will suffer and die for his people, for the whole world, and rise again. And of course, you know that Peter objected to this last week, and Jesus rebuked him, saying that that was his mission, and that our mission as well is to deny ourselves, to give our lives as a living sacrifice to Jesus, and find our true life in this way. The disciples aren't so sure about this. This turns their thinking upside down. What does it mean? How can this be that we are following a Jesus who looks like we'll be a failure? There's a sense of dread at the thought of Jesus dying in Jerusalem as they're walking towards that city. So our passage today is a passage of reassurance. There's a reason why in the Gospels, this amazing scene happens where it does. It's right after Jesus has said, I will suffer and die.

And what Jesus does is he takes three disciples who are closest to him and who are going to lead the church? He brings them to this mountain. And he shows them who he really is, that he is in charge of that death that he was predicting, that he is God's king who willingly goes to the cross for the sake of the salvation of the world. Now, we are in the midst of an election campaign, as you all know.

And one of the common features of any election campaign, anywhere in the world, is that secrets are revealed. Aspects of the candidate's past life are searched out. And the goal is to bring to light things that might reveal hypocrisy, moral failure, or incompetence. And now in our own election, it's been less than two weeks. And already, that is the key feature of this campaign. It is about hidden secrets. And the idea of a hidden secret is to compromise candidates so that the question becomes, can we trust them to lead our country? Are they worthy of our votes? Should we actually follow this person now? Because we know this secret? Now, the very opposite thing happens in our passage today. Because here, we also see secrets revealed. But they are secrets about Jesus that cause us and his disciples to trust him more deeply. It strengthens us to follow him in a more costly way.

Because they reveal that this Messiah, who is Jesus, who they knew well, is completely worthy of all our praise, our obedience, and our sacrifice for him. What is revealed is his hidden glory. It is his glory that shines out in our passage today. And I want to talk about three things in this passage.

Three ways that Jesus' glory is revealed. First, it is revealed that Jesus is God. And secondly, it is revealed that Jesus speaks God's words. And thirdly, his glory is revealed in that Jesus, this glorious God, personally saves us by his suffering. And of course, that theme has to come out because that's the glory of Jesus. Let's look at the first aspect of glory. Look at verse 2.

[4 : 49] When Jesus took Peter and James and John to the highest mountain, that verse tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them. And his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

Now that word transfigure means that God's physical being did not change. This was Jesus who Peter, James, and John knew well. But suddenly, the majesty and the glory of God burst through Jesus' humanity for a short time.

And so Peter, James, and John can see the glory, the very glory of God in him. Now, you can't help but think about Exodus, chapters 33 and 34, where Moses goes up to Mount Sinai, where he receives the Ten Commandments. And in that scene, he asks to see God's glory on the mountain.

And God allowed him just to see a glimpse of his back, of the glory of his back, because he said, God said, if you see my face, you will surely die. So Moses was given that glimpse, just a glimpse of God's glory. And when Moses came back down the mountain, the people saw that the skin of his face shone. And the people of Israel were actually afraid to come to him. His face had to be veiled. And so what was happening here was that for Moses, the light of the glory of God was reflecting off his skin. But here in the transfiguration, the light that is as bright as the sun is not a reflection. It doesn't come from an external source. The source shining from Jesus' face, of that light shining from Jesus' face, comes from within. The source of that light is himself.

And that's why the beginning of Hebrews says that Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God, and he is the exact imprint of God's nature. And he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

[7 : 14] That glory is coming through his humanity. And in that radiance, Jesus' clothes change. They become pure light. He doesn't just share the radiance of God's glory. He actually is the radiance of God's glory bursting through his humanity. And Peter says in a letter that he wrote, 2 Peter 1, he says, we were eyewitnesses of the majesty of God in the glory of Jesus. The majesty of God. That's what they were seeing in Jesus. And as awesome as that is, Peter did not actually see the full picture of Jesus' glory. Because Jesus gave just a small taste of his boundless glory, enough so that his disciples were able to comprehend it, to see something of it. You see, on that mountain, his face shone as the sun, but his face in heaven now is far greater, far beyond the sun in brightness.

Humans could not stand it if they were not transformed with a new resurrection body. And so the three disciples must have been in absolute amazement at seeing this. Can you imagine this Jesus who they knew so well is utterly changed with God's glory? The awesome truth is entering into their hearts that that Jesus who is from their neighborhood, who will serve the world by suffering and dying, is the almighty God himself with them. How do you take that in? And I think that this should deeply encourage you and me this day. Because we live in a world that often dismisses Jesus as one option among many. And it ridicules devotion to him. Why would you sacrifice to follow this Jesus who has died? But this vision says reality is very, very different. Jesus who we trust, who we follow, who we serve, is the almighty God who made the universe and sustains it. And we will one day see this Jesus in all of his glory. And that changes everything for us. I was with two very dear longtime members of our congregation shortly before they died, just a week ago. And I need to say that's a real privilege in ministry to be able to do that, to come in and to pray for those who are dying, to ask for God's grace and mercy, his care and protection, to carry people through death into this life that God has for us. And especially to talk about and to pray about the hope we have in Jesus Christ in the valley of the shadow of death. And it's amazing to be there and know that the person you are talking to will very shortly be with Jesus. And for the families, it's a real blessing, if they have faith, to know that their loved one is experiencing God's complete healing now that they have died, that they suffer no more. But you know, as awesome as that gift is, it's not the greatest gift that they are receiving now. Because the greatest gift is that they are seeing the face of Jesus in all of his glory that we're seeing a little taste of this morning. Because if you love Jesus, if you follow him, you want to see his glorious face more than anything else in all of the world, more than all of the wealth, more than all of the things that this world can give to you, you want to see the face of Jesus in his glory. It's the great Christian longing. You know, John, who was on that mountain that day, wrote in his letter, 1 John, he said, Beloved, we're God's children now. And what we will be has not yet appeared. When Jesus appeared, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Well, seeing Jesus as he is, seeing Jesus in all of his glory. And this is the certain hope that is before us. This vision is a small taster of what we will see in Jesus someday. If you hold on to that hope, that changes you today, John says. It shapes you to be more like Jesus. That's how it purifies you. It shapes you to live for him, to carry our cross for him, because that is what is ahead of you. And you know, that glory of Jesus is the Jesus who suffers for our salvation. He is God with scars on his hands and on his feet.

And we know this because suddenly, in the midst of this awesome sight, Moses and Elijah are there talking to Jesus. In verse 3, if you look down there, he's talking to Moses and Elijah, who were hundreds of years before the two greatest figures of the Old Testament. Moses gave the law. Elijah is the greatest of the prophets who represents them. What are they talking about together there? Well, we don't see it in Matthew. But if you were to go to Luke 9, you would see that they are talking about his coming death in Jerusalem. That is what they are talking about in the conversation.

The purpose for which Jesus comes in his glory is to suffer and die for the salvation of the world. And with great love, Elijah and Moses are encouraging him in that mission.

[13 : 33] All God's gracious work in the Old Testament, his whole plan of salvation and restoring the world, these two people we're pointing to, all of the scriptures testify to him. They find their fulfillment in Jesus.

Well, of course, when Peter sees all of this happen, he's so excited, he can hardly stand it. And he says, Lord, it's good that we are here. If you wish, I'm going to make three tents. Well, that wouldn't work too well in this rain today, would it? We're going to make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. See, what he wants to do is stop for a while. It's much better being here than going to Jerusalem and the cross. We can have a blessed party here on the mountain for the rest of our life. Their friend from their neighborhood, Jesus, is God himself. It takes a while to wrap your mind around this. Let's celebrate. But no, Jesus, the glorious, radiant God, has a purpose.

He has a mission, and it is to die for the sins of the world and to rise again in great power. And that's how this glory affects us today in the deepest possible way. It transforms us.

Because of Jesus' glory, he comes to bring peace with God. He comes to bring his good purposes into our life to heal our relationships. He comes with the promise that we will see Jesus one day and be with him forever. So here's the glory. Jesus is God himself who alone can save us.

And that brings us to the second aspect of his glory. Because Jesus shows his glory in that he speaks God's very words to each of us. Now look at verse 5. Well, Peter is talking. He is interrupted, thankfully, probably mercifully, by a massive change that takes place. A bright cloud overshadows them.

[15 : 41] And this is very like the cloud that overshadowed Mount Sinai when Moses went up to meet God. And that cloud, if you remember, was a sign of God's presence. But it's also in that cloud that God's voice speaks audibly. Now it's the same thing on this mountain. Out of the cloud, you actually hear God's voice. James, John, Peter heard it. And what does that voice say? He says, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. It's the same words that God spoke at the baptism with the addition that he says, listen to him. And it's very important for the disciples to hear it because they were having a hard time accepting God's word. This is a word for us as well because we live in a time of Twitter and YouTube that adds to the already incredible volume of words and images that are coming to us.

And what they do is they seek to grab hold of our attention and to shape our minds. They want us to be followers, right? And to be influenced. But into this world we live in, God speaks to us very clearly.

He says, listen to my beloved son. He is my beloved one, the one that is God himself. And why? Why would we listen? It is because those words are from God, the holy God who created the universe, whose thoughts and his ways are far above our own. His wisdom makes the world's wisdom foolish. And something else happens in this scene, not only do they hear that voice, but the demeanor of the disciples changes. When that cloud engulfs them and they hear that voice, that audible voice of God, they fall onto their face and they are terrified. You see, that's what the glory of God does. They are in the presence of God's holiness. And when you think of, well, what does that word holiness mean? We often think of purity and that's true. But fundamentally, holiness means an otherness. There is an otherness to God. When they understand that they are in the presence of unveiled deity that is infinitely greater than anything they could know, they fall on their face trembling. There is an otherness about God that is incredibly powerful.

It's terrifying and wonderful at the same time. Two days ago, a massive parachute drop took place in the Netherlands. And what was being marked was the 75th anniversary of Operation Market Garden in World War II. And in this celebration, there was a veteran named Sandy Kortman who was 97 years old and he parachuted again in that Dutch city. 75 years after, he did it the first time when he was 22. Same drop zone where he was taken prisoner by the Germans.

Thousands of people watched this and they applauded as Mr. Kortman landed. He jumped with another person. Well, he described the jump as thoroughly terrifying. But he added, when the door opened, I thought, what a way down.

[19 : 24] But you know, he also said, it was absolutely wonderful to see the ground so far below. Both of those emotions and senses were in him. It's how something can strike terror and be wonderful at the same time.

God's audible voice is terrifying. It's like nothing else in the world. It has the power to make the universe spring into existence. Yet what God is saying in his awesome holiness and otherwardness is wonderful.

Jesus is his beloved, precious, glorious son. Listen to him. That is the weight that is behind that command to us.

May we listen to Jesus' words in the next few chapters of Matthew. Because Jesus is going to speak about forgiveness, about our money, about temptation, about our humility, about our marriages.

He's going to talk about grace and salvation through it all, knowing they all come from God himself. So listen to him. He is God himself speaking to us.

[20 : 29] That's his glory. And then finally, thirdly, the last part of our passage, verses 7 through 13, Jesus' glory is that he personally, humbly, saves us by his suffering.

And we've heard this a bit already. You know, that's a theme that runs through all of scriptures. That this glorious God is also the one who humbles himself for the sake of our salvation.

These incredible events end with a beautiful scene. In the midst of their fears and terror, look at verse 7. Jesus touches his disciples.

And he says to them, do not be afraid. And then he raised them up. He put his hands on them and raised them up. That is a picture of the gospel of Jesus.

Jesus, who is almighty God, comes into people's lives personally to drive away fear and to raise us into the very presence of this holy God, who is terrifying otherwise.

[21 : 37] And we call this God father because he adopts us by the grace of Jesus. Notice that when Jesus raises them up, he is alone with them. And this continues to be his work for you as well because God raises us, Jesus raises us from your fears.

And he always raises us to himself. And gives us a vision of himself alone. So as you look to him, as you look to his kingdom, your fears and anxieties grow dim and his glory fills your mind.

You can see him alone. Jesus reminds the disciples and us that this doesn't just happen. It happens in verses 9 through 13 only by his suffering that he can save us and raise us up.

This is his glory. You know, John the Baptist, who was the Elijah promised, who would come before the Messiah, he suffered and died. And this is the sign that the glory of Jesus to the Messiah will be that he will suffer and die as well.

I think John Calvin sums it up so well. He could have done the sermon in one sentence. The resplendent son of God of the mountain is the same as the suffering son of man.

[22 : 56] And so I want to leave this passage with an image. As the book of Revelation reveals to us in chapter 5, Jesus is both the lion who conquers with unimaginable majesty and power.

And Jesus is also the meek lamb who suffered and was slain for us and for our salvation. Revelation says all glory belongs to Jesus, the lion and the lamb.

And so may we also deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him because worthy is that lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

All we have belongs to him. The vision of his glory is our great strength. May we live for that glory and be shaped by it each day.

In Jesus' name, amen.